

School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of
Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 305: The Relationship Screenplay
Section 19161D
Fall 2023

Instructor: Harold Apter
Class Schedule: Wednesday 4 - 6:50 PM
Class Location: SCB 304
Office Hours: By Appointment (Zoom preferred)
Contact Information: hapter@usc.edu / haroldapter@gmail.com
818-259-5703 (phone or text)

Course Objective

Complete a first draft of a screenplay, exploring the world of a well-defined group of characters, building your story from their relationships with each other and exploring the effect those relationships have on their lives and the lives of others in their orbit.

Course Description

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.*

John Donne, 1624

Countries change, cultures change, societies evolve, rivalries grow, alternate facts are born, emotions are stirred up, wars are fought, battles won and lost. All this grounded in the simple truth that Donne expressed so many years ago. None of us are so totally alone that we do not have an effect on someone else's life. Those interactions can be loving or mean or benign on the surface. But in each, some sort of relationship is born. As writers it is our job to explore those relationships. That's what dramatic writing is all about. No matter the genre, in a broad sense every great screenplay is about some sort of relationship or relationships. The ups the downs, the wants and needs of the characters as they work through the emotional and physical minefields of their various interactions.

In your studies of this craft, you are and continue to be encouraged to explore conflict in your rendering of scenes and stories. Without conflict you have a story that is the dramatic equivalent of watching paint dry. Uninteresting, unreadable, and unproducible. What creates conflict are the opposing needs and wants of the characters as they interact with each other and struggle, each in their own way to move forward to their desired outcome. For example, it's not just about a bunch of people trapped in a cave or on a submarine or on a disabled spacecraft or a school or a marriage or any other plot or genre you may find interesting. It's about who each of those people

are, what makes them who they are, and how the experience of being with the others will change them all. Some in big ways some more subtly.

In a broad sense, it is your characters who create their own story through their relationships with others. In Act One you build a world for them and give them a purpose in that world. You then break that purpose by introducing obstacles that drive them forward into their story. Obstacles that are derived from the specific needs of the characters and their relationships. Therefore, as referenced above, every screenplay is, in a sense, a “relationship screenplay”.

For the purposes of this class, you are encouraged to start small. Think about one character. Who is this person? What sort of world surrounds them? What makes them interesting to you? Then, moving outwards, think about the people in their life. Could be family, co-workers, even somebody on the horizon whom they have not yet met and with whom they might collide, either negatively or positively. Do not worry about plot. Not yet. More about this in your first assignment.

Assignments:

Will be due to the professor and your classmates in pdf form via email by 12:00 PM Sundays. All assignments should be written using Word (for synopsis and outlines) and Final Draft (or an appropriate professional screenwriting software for scripts).

Topics and methodology:

The course is designed to use group discussion and critique, review of film, individual readings of student’s work, class discussion and critique.

Students will be expected to participate in all discussions and to help their fellow students develop their outlines and screenplays. In The Industry, writers are often called upon to ***work on their feet*** and this classroom will be used as a training ground to hone this important skill.

Requirements:

All students ***must*** complete an entire First Draft by the end of the semester. Assignments must be delivered on time. Students are required to be positive and involved in class discussions. Failure to complete a First Draft by the end of the semester will result in an F for the course.

Grading:

Grading will be dependent on depth and breadth of thought in assignment preparation as well as serious and constructive class participation. All assignments must be submitted on time. **The professor feels strongly about prompt attendance at all classes and conferences.** Students who cannot make a class must contact the professor by email or through the front office ***before***

they miss the class. It is the *student's responsibility* to communicate with the professor in a timely manner. The students are allowed one excused absence without any effect on their grade. After that point, each time a student misses a class their grade will drop a grade point for each class missed. Exceptions to this rule are medical emergencies.

The professor expects students to conduct themselves in a *professional* manner as they prepare to work in The Industry. Professional means all work delivered on time, neat, printed, well thought out. Hurried or slipshod work will not be appreciated. Effort is of critical importance in determining final grade.

Areas that will be considered in determining course final grade are:

- 15 assignments. Each assignment is 4 % for a total of 60%
- Class #6 verbal project presentation – 10%
- Classroom participation – 10%
- Final Screenplay – 20%

This course is demanding, and success depends on a student's commitment to hard work and originality. Working as a professional writer involves collaboration and this professor expects the students to be involved in each and every discussion. *Lack of involvement or contributing to other student's work will adversely affect the student's grade.*

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A	100% to 94%	C	76% to 73%
A-	93% to 90%	C-	72% to 70%
B+	89% to 87%	D+	69% to 67%
B	86% to 83%	D	66% to 63%
B-	82% to 80%	D-	62% to 60%
C+	79% to 77%	F	59% to 0%

Expectation of Professionalism:

All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, posted, snapchatted, or be posted anywhere else on the internet. Students are not permitted to create their own class recordings without the instructor's permission. Violations of these policies will be met with the appropriate disciplinary sanction.

Notes Going Forward:

On giving notes, let's focus on "what you want to see in future pages, rather than solely critiquing the current pages." In other words, notes going forward.

This draft is a **WORK IN PROGRESS**. Please write notes to yourself in your draft as you go along. Because this is a work in progress, you can hand in your final revised draft with notes explaining areas that need work, as well as solutions you want to try. You *will* find this helpful when you make another pass of your screenplay.

It is important to understand there is no perfect draft – there can only be stronger drafts that better represent your intention. You will rewrite this draft again and again. With each pass, you are trying to get it closer and closer to what your original intention.

Perfection is the enemy of the good. Be patient and support yourself throughout the process. Try not to internalize the notes. It's not about you. It's about the work. And this is a work in progress. It will get better if you have patience.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equals one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

Class Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing **explores private concerns, troubling societal questions, emotional vulnerabilities, and strengths** - and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is a work-in-progress. We are here to help each other become better writers. Rather than trying to tell a student what is wrong, advise them on how to make it better. We should strive at all times for constructive criticism. First see the positive before addressing the negative.

A working writer needs to learn to *collaborate* while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives. Learning how to get your "messaging across" is a skill worth developing.

Individual Meetings:

The professor encourages his students to meet separately to discuss their screenplay and concerns. The professor will answer limited questions by email, but would rather answer questions in depth during class time or during office hours (Zoom sessions will be set up upon request). The professor encourages his students to bring their questions to class so that the other students may benefit from discussing their individual story problems.

Suggested Reading:

Screenwriting is Rewriting by Jack Epps, Jr. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, London, 2016, ISBN: 9781628927405. Available only Amazon, or from Bloomsbury Publishing.

The Tools of Screenwriting by David Howard and Edward Mabley.

Course Schedule and Syllabus:

This is the general layout of the class, but the Professor reserves the right to change the weekly assignments and deadlines as per the needs of the class. Students will be notified of changes in class.

All assignments are due to the professor and the class Sundays by 12 PM

Assignments are subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Week 1 8/23 Present your favorite "relationship film". Show clips if available.

Discuss and decide on the ideas you may be writing this semester. A general class discussion answering the question of whose story is it?

Assignment: Write a rough 1 to 2 page treatment for 2 or 3 ideas.

Week 2 8/30 Discuss: Whose story is it? Who is the main character, what do they want and need? What is the main character trying to achieve – what is their goal that is driving them throughout the story? Examine internal and external character story.

Assignment: What does the main character want, and who and what are stopping him/her/they from achieving it? Expand the treatment of the idea you want to pursue. Run with it and see where it takes you in 3 to 5 pages.

Week 3 9/6 Discuss the “internal character story” that is the emotional underpinning to the screenplay.

Begin discussion of sequencing.

Assignment: Begin to outline the story. Describe the external character want and the internal character need, and describe how they are different, and yet both important to the main character. Explain how want and the need might change by the end of the story.

Week 4 9/13 Discuss the nature of character relationships. What are the important interactions with other people that define the main character’s world? How can we better tell our character’s story by using supporting characters in the screenplay?

Continue discussion of sequencing.

Assignment: Create at least 4 to 5 supporting characters that are important to the main character’s world. Describe who they are, their back stories and how they are important to the main character. What do these supporting characters want out of their life? What are their goals? Do they complement the main character or conflict with the main character’s goals?

Create a character wheel for the main character in your story.

Continue to outline the story for presentation in week 6.

Week 5 9/20 Read and discuss the character relationships. Discuss the nature of the bond between the characters. Discuss and examine how a bond between characters can change.

Continue discussion of sequencing (if not completed).

Assignment: Continue to prepare the story outline for presentation for next week’s class. Present each student in the class with a **beat sheet** that highlights each scene.

Week 6 9/27 Verbal class presentation of story outline and relationship developments. The student will receive story and character notes.

Assignment: Revise and rewrite the outline as per the class notes for delivery by the next class. When signed off by the instructor, begin writing the first sequence, pages 1-15 (can be a bit more or a bit less, but stay in that ballpark).

Week 7 10/4 Read and discuss the pages looking to clarifying and simplifying the character story and plot problems. Focusing on establishing the main characters and the world of the story.

Assignment: Write the second sequence, pages 15-30 (a bit more or a bit less).

Week 8 10/11 Read and discuss the pages. The discussion will focus on a discussion of the supporting characters and the beginning of character relationships.

Assignment: Write the third sequence, approximately pages 30-45. All major character relationships should be planted and beginning to be developed.

Week 9 10/18 Discuss the use of subplots in building a solid and meaningful second act. Explain the use of character relationships to expand and add dimension to the main character's internal issues.

Assignment: Write the fourth sequence, approximately pages 45-60.

Week 10 10/25 Read and discuss the pages. Clarify the main character's want and goal that will drive the second act. Discuss the mid-point plot turn.

Assignment: Write the fifth sequence, approximately pages 60-75.

Week 11 11/1 Read and discuss the pages. Discuss the major relationship with the significant other in the screenplay. At this point in the screenplay, the major relationships should be well developed and a major focus of the subplots.

Assignment: Write the sixth sequence, approximately pages 75-90.

Week 12 11/8 Read and discuss the pages. The main character should be close to achieving their goal but finds the complications of the story through well drawn relationships and subplots thwarting their way.

Assignment: Write the seventh/eighth sequence, approximately pages 90-105.

Week 13 11/15 Read and discuss the pages. Discuss and examine the raising of stakes and the buildup of rising tension as we enter the third act. Major character relationships and subplots should be resolving by this point in the screenplay.

Assignment: Review notes and do a revision focusing on the main character's emotional arc and the major character relationships.

FINAL SCRIPTS DUE: 11/21, 6 PM
(If you need more time, please reach out to the professor for an extension)

NO CLASS 11/22 (THANKSGIVING BREAK)

Week 14 11/29 Read and discuss **final screenplays**. Evaluate and discuss each student's work. Discuss the progress and the areas that each student needs to focus on in their revision. Students will be given "polish" notes, such as character consistency, dialogue, character relationships clarification.

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Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

A.I. Policy:

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narrative continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling that we learn to source and execute our work via our own unique imagination.

Creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course. All assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

<p>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
